

Sesame Street is one of the longest-running shows in the world. It debuted in 1969 to positive reviews and high viewership and is still airing today. While it's said that a lady never admits her age, I will admit to being among those who watched those very first episodes. Sesame Street remained a popular children's show for quite some time, peaking in the 90s. A 1996 survey found that 95% of all American preschoolers had watched it by the time they were three. This would include my own children who were born in 1992 and 1993.

The title of my sermon today is "Put Down the Duckie" which is a Sesame Street Song from 1986. In case you aren't familiar with it, here is a short clip\* from the original airing: "Put Down the Duckie" (30sec): [https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxGrJv\\_3SPngdEwWECVxuYBdShSe4OiAle](https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxGrJv_3SPngdEwWECVxuYBdShSe4OiAle)

\*If unable to access the video clip - Here is how it begins:

Ernie:	Excuse me, Mr. Hoots I hate to bug a busy bird But I want to learn the sax And I need a helpful word I always get a silly squeak When I play the blues
Hoots:	Ernie, keep your cool I'll teach ya how to blow the sax I think I dig your problem It's rubber, and it quacks You'll never find the skill you seek Till you pay your dues
Chorus:	You gotta put down the duckie Put down the duckie Put down the duckie Yeah, you gotta leave the duck alone You gotta put down the duckie Put down the duckie Put down the duckie If you wanna play the saxophone!

You see, Ernie was really attached to his rubber duckie and reluctant to surrender it. And while he professed a desire to play the saxophone so that he could join the jazz band, he kept getting a squeaking sound because the rubber duckie that he was clutching so tightly was getting in the way. So Hoots encouraged Ernie to "put down the duckie" so that he could focus fully on playing the saxophone.

After the initial airing of the song, the producers recorded portions sung by each of the season's celebrity guests. These verses were then edited into a montage\*\* with all of these celebrities joining in the message to "put down the duckie," further reiterating the importance of letting go of something that you are really attached to in order to accomplish something bigger and more meaningful.

As with many lessons from Sesame Street, the importance of “putting down the duckie” applies not just to children, but also to adults. Let’s look closely at this morning’s Scripture verse (Luke 9:18-24) to see how “putting down the duckie” applies in our lives as followers of Christ.

The scripture verse this morning began with Jesus praying before talking to his disciples, asking them what it was exactly that people believed about him, “Who do the crowds say that I am”. His disciples replied that the crowds that were following Him believed He was a prophet. Then Jesus asked more directly, what it was that the disciples believed about him, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter responded that they recognized that Jesus was the Messiah.

Jesus wasn’t asking this because He didn’t know what people thought of Him, or even what the disciples thought of Him. He already knew all of that. I believe he was asking to emphasize to His disciples that there was something important that separated them from the masses. The disciples didn’t merely think of Jesus as a teacher or a prophet. They understood that He was in fact the Messiah.

Jesus then revealed some of the events that were to come. He mentioned great suffering, rejection, and death...but also that he would be raised on the third day. .Even though all of this falls in line with Isaiah chapter 53 prophecies about how the Messiah would be rejected, suffer and die as an atonement for the sins of humanity, the disciples were stunned. In fact, versions of this incident recorded in Matthew and Mark include Peter’s response of disbelief that Jesus would be rejected and suffer in such a way.

What I want to focus on this morning is what He said to His disciples next. As recorded in v23, He said, *‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.’*

In this statement, Jesus was trying to convey that his coming rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection would have such a significant impact on humanity that people would emerge who earnestly want to become followers. However, He was also making the point that because of our human nature, it wasn’t going to be as simple as making a quick decision to follow. To truly be His followers, He said that we need to deny ourselves and take up our cross daily. And I think it’s important to take note of the word “daily”. He’s telling us that it’s not something we do just

one time in our life or a few times a year or weekly on Sunday mornings. It is something we need to do each and every day. But what does it mean to deny yourself and take up your cross daily? The apostle Paul gives a hint in his letter to the Galatians chapter 5 verse 24 *“And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”*

Paul says that just as Jesus was crucified in the flesh literally, those who belong to Him have crucified the flesh figuratively. When referencing the flesh, Paul isn't talking about our fleshy body tissue. Instead, he is talking about the ego within us. This ego feels an emptiness, but prefers to use resources in its own power to fill the void rather than relying on the Lord. Psychologists define the ego as the part of our human nature that is engaged in self-justification. This ego feeds on the sinful human nature of man. To pick up our cross daily, we need to set aside those things that get in the way of following Christ so that we can focus on Him. We need to be willing to crucify or “put to death” the desires of our sinful human nature. Essentially, we need to “Put down the Duckie.”

But why? Why can't we hold onto the duckie? Why can't we hold onto the desires of our sinful nature? Listen closely to the words of Jesus from verse 24 from our scripture passage: *“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”*

That sounds a little bit counter-intuitive, doesn't it? To save your life you lose it, to lose your life you save it? The apostle Paul expounds on this in his letter to the Romans 8:6-11 - *6 To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit[g] is life and peace. 7 For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit,[h] since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit[i] is life because of righteousness. 11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ[j] from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through[k] his Spirit that dwells in you.”*

So Paul is explaining that holding onto the desires of the flesh is death because sin separates us from God. In contrast, yielding to the Spirit brings life and peace through righteousness. It is important to understand what Paul means by the Spirit. If you look up the passage in your

Bible, you will see that the word Spirit is capitalized. Paul's not talking generically about the non-physical part of a person that makes up their character, like if you say someone has a spunky spirit. Spirit with a capital S references the third person of the trinity, where the trinity is composed of God-the father, Jesus-the son, and the Holy Spirit-who dwells within believers. The Spirit feeds on God's truth. To follow Jesus, we need to stay in step with the Spirit.

So, in essence, the flesh or ego is the part of a believer that is at odds with the Spirit. The flesh desires things like fame, honor, money, success, revenge, material possessions. To deny ourselves daily and take up our cross to follow Jesus, we need to let go of those desires of the Flesh and yield instead to the Spirit who dwells within us. The Spirit desires things like peace, patience, kindness, love, grace, mercy, wisdom, understanding.

But the big question is HOW. How do we do this? How do we put down the duckie? How do we surrender those things that are so strongly desired by our human nature so that we can yield to the Spirit? And how can we do it daily? While there are many ways we can accomplish this, this morning I would like to offer three practical ways to help put down the duckie so we can pick up our cross daily and follow Jesus.

1 - Include God in everything. James 4:8 (NLT) "*8 Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world.*" When we neglect God, it leads us down a slippery slope. We quickly become selfish and self-absorbed. But when we include God in everything, we build a better relationship with Him and learn how to grow closer to him. As we strengthen our relationship to God and grow closer to Him, we become filled more and more with the Spirit, and less and less with our selfish and sinful ways of the world. Including God in everything enhances our joy and our peace, and it helps us realize just how much He truly loves us. Including God in everything gives us courage in the dark times knowing He's with us every step of the way.

Don't confine God to Sunday mornings. Invite Him into every area of your lives, morning to night, seven days a week. Surrender to Him, welcome Him, and talk to Him. Be intentional about strengthening your relationship with Him in everything that you do and everywhere that you are: at church, in the car, at home, at the grocery store, on an airplane. The stronger your relationship with God, the easier it is to yield to the Spirit.

2 - Soak in God's Word. To "soak in" is to enter something by a gradual process like when you pour water around the base of the tree and let the roots soak it up. To be healthy, trees require a slow watering process, so that they can soak up what is needed to grow deep roots. In my yard, we can't just dump a bucket of water on the trees once a season and call it good. They are on a drip system that waters them daily. Similarly, we need the slow, daily watering of our souls as we meditate on God's Word so that we grow in our knowledge of Him one drop at a time and can really soak up His love and grace.

Of course one way to do this is by reading the Bible daily, but that's not the only way to soak up His Word. We can pay close attention to a sermon, read a devotional, listen to a podcast, concentrate on the lyrics of the Hymns we sing, participate in a Bible study, or all of the above. Soaking in God's word helps us stay rooted in the Spirit like trees along a riverbank. Psalm 1:3 TLB says, *"But they delight in doing everything God wants them to, and day and night are always meditating on his laws and thinking about ways to follow him more closely. They are like trees along a riverbank bearing luscious fruit each season without fail. Their leaves shall never wither, and all they do shall prosper."*

3- Practice Selflessness. Educational specialists have discovered that hands-on-learning is one of the most effective ways for adults to master new skills; we remember 5% by what we hear, 20% by what we see, and 75% by what we do! One of the best ways to combat the selfish nature of the flesh is to practice the selfless nature of the Spirit by putting it to use. A good way to practice selflessness (instead of selfishness) is to love your neighbor through our actions. Philippians 2:3-4 (NRSV) *"3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."*

We can do this through outreach projects, but we can also do it in our daily lives by simply practicing kindness to others. We can be patient and let someone in ahead of us when merging down to one lane because of construction. We can thank the person at the check-out counter at the post office. We can take time out of our day to write a note of encouragement, call, or visit someone who is going through a difficult time. We can ask our grumpy neighbor how his day is going or if there is anything we can do for him and then listen and take action to help him out.

The more we practice selflessness, the more keeping in step with the Spirit becomes second nature and the easier it is to set aside our selfishness!

John Wesley, who is recognized as the founder of the Methodist movement, wrote and preached at length about the role of God's grace in preparing, redeeming, and continually shaping us into the people He created us to be. Wesley taught that denying ourselves and taking up our cross requires doing things that go against our human nature. But in doing so, we draw closer to God, open our lives to receive His grace, begin walking in step with the Spirit, and become more like Jesus in our daily lives. As each of you goes forth this week, I encourage you to include God in everything, soak in His word, and practice selflessness. Be willing to “put down the duckie” and ready yourself to receive God’s amazing grace in your lives.

Please join me in a closing prayer: *Heavenly Father, We truly want to follow Jesus, but often find it so hard to surrender the desires of our sinful nature. We praise and thank You for the gift of the Holy Spirit within us that desires the things that you desire: peace, patience, kindness, love, grace, mercy, wisdom, and understanding. Guide us each and every day to put our selfish desires aside, pick up our cross, and follow Jesus. Pour out your grace into our lives and help us be the people you created us to be. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen*

Endnote: \*\*YouTube full celebrity montage (6+ minutes): [https://youtu.be/acBixR\\_JRuM](https://youtu.be/acBixR_JRuM)